

Healing landscapes and lives: A reconciliatory approach to conservation

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Like that non-contributing partner in your school group project, Canada has made very little progress on fulfilling the international biodiversity commitments made in Aichi Japan in 2010. Those commitments called for reversing the decline of biodiversity worldwide by 2020. In fact, a procrastinating Canada took five years just to roll the Aichi Biodiversity Targets into the federal government's own biodiversity strategy. With that decision Canada made Aichi Target 11 its primary objective. It is Canada's "Target 1."

Aichi Target 11 commits Canada to protecting 17 percent of the country's lands and waters by 2020. The target must be reached in a manner that prioritizes areas of high importance to our ecosystems and is equitable for our society.

While setting Canada's Target 1 marked a symbolic step forward for protected places, like any school project, you need to invest time and resources and collaborate with others in order to make progress. Instead, Canada has had a piecemeal approach to protecting ecosystems, all while the remaining public lands are rife with mismanagement, poorly planned extraction, and habitat degradation.

This relative neglect shows. From 2010 to the end of 2016, Canada only managed to protect an additional 1 percent, bringing our total to an (un)illustrious 10.6 percent.

How will we achieve Aichi Target 11 by 2020?

The federal government likely had this question in mind when, in 2016, it estab-

lished the Pathway to Canada Target 1 – a plan detailing how exactly Canada will increase its current protected areas network by an additional 40 percent in less than five years.

Thankfully, the government also realized that it shouldn't do this alone and appointed a number of advisory groups, including an Indigenous Circle of Experts (ICE), a National Advisory Panel (NAP), and a Local Government Advisory Group.

Indigenous Circle of Experts

In March 2018, the Indigenous Circle of Experts (ICE) released a report titled *We Rise Together*; this 112-page document outlines a framework and 28 recommendations for Indigenous participation in pursuing the Aichi Target 11. *We Rise Together* is a different breed of report. It embodies the spirits of respect, cooperation and reconciliation, all the while accommodating Canada's historically Westernized approach to conservation. The report itself is many-sided: placing government protections within the context of their colonialist roots, reaffirming the alignment between conservation values and Indigenous ways of living, and offering a strong proposal for Indigenous-led conservation. The sections of the report offer directives for creating "ethical spaces", incorporating ceremony and oral history into planning, and blanketing all relationships in mutual respect and understanding. This humanization of land-use planning is as refreshing as it is long-overdue.

Of critical importance to the report is a reminder that Canada's protected places are part of the legacy of colonialism. The

Crown has historically framed protected places as wild, pristine, and people-free; this contributed to a dark history of Indigenous expulsion, human-rights violations, forcible displacement, and targeted persecution. Where protected areas overlap with Indigenous territories, Crown law takes precedence, leading to the frequent criminalization of traditional ways of living.

The ghosts of history linger on, as with the Mikisew Cree of Wood Buffalo National Park. Their territory was "loaned" to the Crown in 1922 under the assumption that they would one day be able to harvest the plains and wood bison when populations returned to sustainable levels. In 2018, the lands of the park have yet to be returned to the Mikisew and the practice of bison harvest remains restricted. Adding further insult to injury, if any of the Mikisew were to hunt bison, they run the risk of heavy fines, incarceration, or even lifetime bans from their community in the Wood Buffalo National Park. While the Park has made certain progress towards reconciliation, its colonial underpinnings continue to haunt the Mikisew people.

Acknowledging this as a shroud over Canada's protected places, ICE chose to move forward, pushing for a strong Indigenous presence in modern day conservation efforts. The central focus of ICE's recommendations is to establish Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs); these are defined in the report as "...lands and waters where Indigenous governments have the primary role in protecting and conserving ecosystems through Indigenous laws, governance and knowledge systems."



Wood Buffalo National Park PHOTO: © L. BOCKNER, Sierra Club BC

Emphasis is placed on both providing opportunity for Indigenous governments to express self-determination and facilitating inter-governmental relationships of a broad spectrum. In the end, the Indigenous governments would be empowered to conserve wild spaces as they see fit, while also enabling traditional land-uses that have been historically stifled and supporting a diversified economy. Clearly this is a significant challenge to current management regimes.

The new term, IPCA, gives a more textured definition to Indigenous-led conservation regions; it marries core principles from the United Nations Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to pre-existing frameworks for conservation. IPCAs can take many forms: Tribal Parks, Indigenous Cultural Landscapes, Indigenous Protected Areas, and Indigenous Conserved Areas. The three core components of an IPCA are that it is Indigenous-led, it represents a long-term commitment to conservation, and it elevates Indigenous Rights and Responsibilities.

IPCas provide a dual-opportunity of healing, one for both Canada's landscapes

and their most long-standing inhabitants. At this point, reconciliation efforts cannot be separated from conservation and protected places. *Together We Rise* brings revitalization to the heart of conservation – of lands, of culture, of language and of spirit.

National Advisory Panel

The National Advisory Panel (NAP) has developed a complementary report to that of the ICE, *Canada's Conservation Vision*; its compatibility rests in its emphasis on reconciliation and Indigenous participation at the forefront of conservation. The report begins by emphasizing the serious biodiversity crisis that is currently gripping the planet and underlines Canada's responsibility as caretakers of 20 percent of the world's freshwaters and almost a third of the planet's land-based carbon storage. Clearly, we need more protected areas and we will need to move above and beyond 17 percent so that we are not only taking care of the planet, but so that the planet can take of us too.

The panel also points to the fact that all federal political parties support creating an extensive network of protected areas in

Canada. In 2015, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development unanimously recommended that "the Government of Canada set even more ambitious targets for protected areas than those established in the Aichi Target 11."

However, the NAP also recognizes that it is imperative that the establishment of new protected areas is done correctly from the start. It identified a number of overarching elements necessary to ensure that conservation efforts are effective and will last the test of time.

The first of those elements is the need to create "ethical space" for engagement among groups with different worldviews, in particular, among Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

It's important that the report places Canada's protected areas work in the context of reconciliation, emphasizing that it is imperative that "all short-term and long-term actions toward biodiversity conservation in Canada be undertaken in a way that contributes to reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada."

Ethical Space – an environment where two societies with fundamentally different experiences and ways of looking at the world meet together, listen deeply, and then work together equally to come to solutions.

This will require the establishment of an ethical space where Indigenous Peoples have an equitable place both in the creation and management of protected areas. Again, this would amount to a significant departure from business as usual.

The NAP also highlights a lengthy statement from the principles outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, from an Aboriginal perspective, also requires reconciliation with the natural world. If human beings resolve problems between themselves but continue to destroy the natural world, then reconciliation remains incomplete. This is a perspective that we as Commissioners have repeatedly heard: that reconciliation will never occur unless we are also reconciled with the earth.

Each and every one of us has a part to play in reconciliation. Creating and maintaining protected areas provides an amazing opportunity for Canadians to advance reconciliation efforts.

One of the biggest obstacles to the creation of protected areas was noted earlier: Canada's haphazard and increasingly politicized approach. Despite the fact that protected areas have clear economic, health, and societal benefits, progress on establishing new ones has essentially stalled.

The NAP identifies this as a critical obstacle and states a need to fundamentally overhaul our approach to establishing protected areas. It recommends establishing a new federal Nature Conservation Department, which would be overseen by an independent Advisory Council that would not only advise on issues but also report on progress.

The NAP report also shines when it comes to recommending how Canada should prioritize the creation of new protected areas. In the short term, it recommends starting with initiatives already underway. This makes good sense as time is rapidly running out to achieve 17 percent protection by 2020. For example, they identify that Alberta has identified potential areas to protect caribou habitat during range planning. These "early opportunities" alone would bring Canada up to an estimated 14 percent.

The report also discusses existing and potentially new legal frameworks for the establishment of Indigenous Protected Areas and lists several opportunities that Indigenous communities have identified across Canada. For example, the Mikisew Cree First Nation has identified the importance of expanding protection around Wood Buffalo National Park in wood bison habitat and the Peace Athabasca Delta.

Moving forward, the NAP recommends a long-term strategic approach to biodiversity conservation, focusing on gaps in the current protected areas network. Currently, there is a huge gap in protecting Canada's 194 unique ecoregions. The reports points to habitat fragmentation as the biggest threat to biodiversity; it recommends creating a

protected areas network with large cores of undisturbed areas that are connected by smaller corridors or "stepping stones." Aquatic ecosystems – such as wetlands, rivers, and lakes – act as Mother Nature's highway system, so it's no surprise that the report also underlines the critical need to protect more of Canada's freshwater systems.

AWA's Wild Spaces 2020 campaign focuses on gaps within Alberta's own protected areas network. While some areas, such as our Rocky Mountains, are relatively well protected, there is a critical need to increase protection of other natural regions, such as our grasslands and foothills. You can read more about what AWA will be doing to advance Alberta's protected areas network in Grace's article "Wild Spaces 2020: Short-term goals and the long road to protection."

Overall, we found both reports refreshing and ambitious. The only question that remains, and it's fundamentally important, is whether federal and provincial governments will actually implement the recommendations made. We are excited to be a part of the future anticipated by these reports – where a diverse group of people come together to make the world a more biodiverse and equitable place. 🌱



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